

## **Radiation Therapy and Oral Health**

### **Why do I need to see a dentist?**

If you are receiving radiation therapy for either your head or neck area, it is important to get a complete oral evaluation prior to treatment. Helpful radiation therapy can also cause oral or dental side effects that can become a problem if left untreated. With early dental care, you can help to prevent or minimize these problems. If you need any dental work it would be best to have it done prior to treatment. Research has shown that preventive dental care can help to reduce dental & oral complications during cancer treatment.

### **What oral problems can arise?**

People respond differently to treatment. You may have all or none of these problems that coincide with radiation therapy.

Dry mouth is often noticed after/during the first weeks of radiation. Dry mouth may make chewing and swallowing difficult. Taking small bites, chewing slowly, and drinking liquids with your meal will make eating easier.

Some people experience loss of taste. Foods that once tasted good may now become unpleasant. Usually this only lasts for a short amount of time and most people regain full taste in the month following treatment.

Mouth sores can also arise during treatment. The soft tissue of the mouth may bleed and become sensitive. Your dentist can assist by providing mouth rinses and pain relievers. Mouth sores are usually at their worst during treatment, but generally heal during the weeks after radiation.

You may also experience muscle stiffness or jaw bone changes. If you experience stiffness, your doctor can prescribe you with special jaw exercises. If you need a tooth extracted after your treatment, you will need to take special precautions to avoid complications.

### **After Treatment**

You need to continue regular checkups and maintain good dental care after you complete your treatment. Excellent oral hygiene is a key to prevent future oral problems.